

George Rochberg's *Fifth Symphony*: A Commentary by the Composer

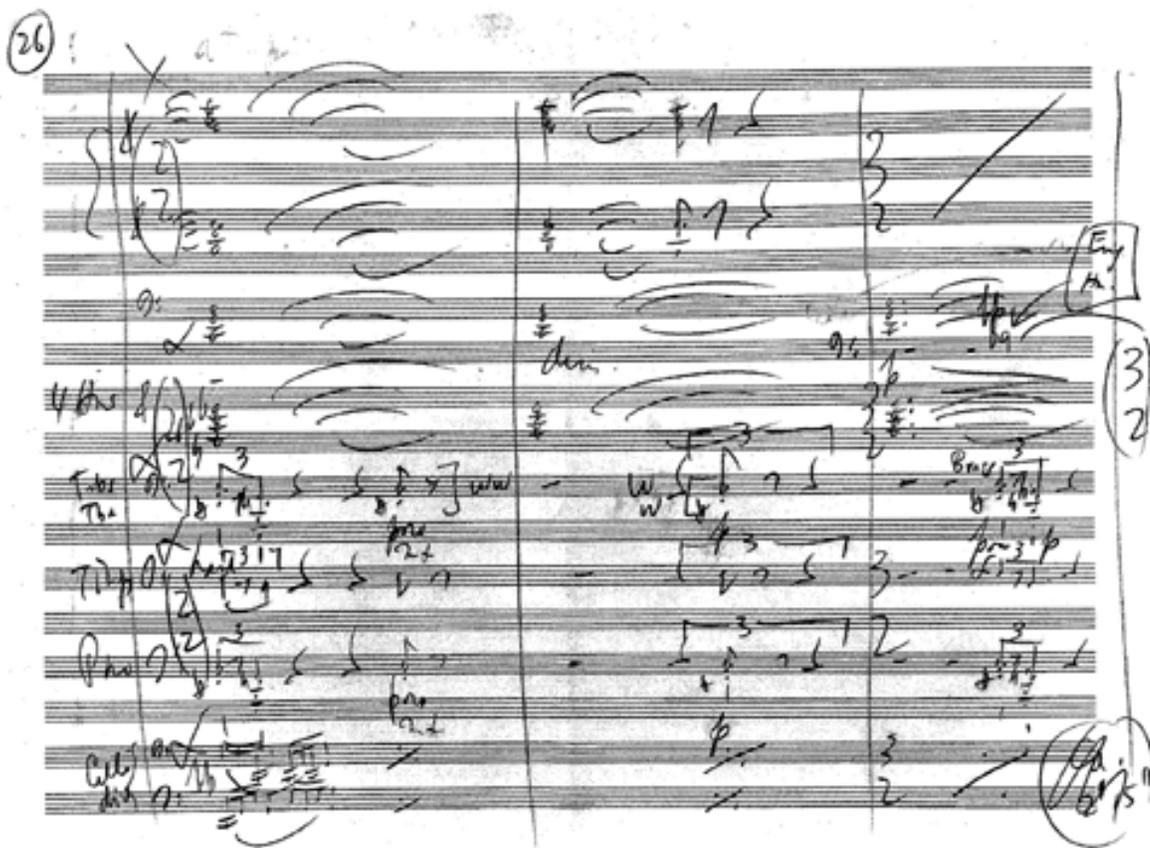
Of the six symphonies I have produced, the fifth is the most terse--some twenty-two minutes in playing time--because it is the most compressed, and its compression determines its single, large-scale, uninterrupted movement form.

Terseness and compression are the outward signs of an internal essence which I can only describe as high emotional intensity. The unrestrained nature of the opening burning statement--the core of the work--is a kind of musical sun flare, a high energy release. From here the work unfolds as a spiraling form in ever widening turns, each turn marking a new section, gathering up ideas and materials until at the Finale everything is brought together and unified.

There are seven sections in all: Opening statement, Episode 1, Development 1, Episode 2, Development 2, Episode 3, and Finale. The challenge for me was to provide the work with maximum heterogeneity of gesture while still producing a sense of strong, inevitable organic growth, that sense that even the most seemingly diverse levels of expression are ultimately variant forms of a basic idea emanating from and traceable back to an originating source according to the maxim: as in nature, so in art.

The character of the three episodes, therefore, differs dramatically from that of the two developments. Each episode is an exploration of widely changing gestures, orchestral groupings, and colors. Each development is a further probe and penetration--high voltage as in the opening--into what has taken place up to that point in the music.

I think my favorite section is the second episode. There the horns of the orchestra call to each other in a kind of magical time and space creating a long, four-part recitative whose unspoken, but underlying subtext is the ancient tale of the fatally wounded Roland, blowing his horn with his last ounce of strength to call back his king, Charlemagne.



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This medieval image has always had special meaning for me. There are times when it suddenly seems very clear that we, humankind, are Roland--and that Charlemagne is too far away to hear our desperate cries for help.

The function of art is to show us--as in a mirror--ourselves in all our shifting, changing states of uncertain existence. Perhaps art can ameliorate; but mostly I do not think so. I see art, rather than as an escape from the fires of reality, as another way --different from religion or science or psychology or philosophy--a way to pour out music, not wildly and uncontrollably, but in a disciplined and centered way, generously, passionately, like the sun from which we and our earth derive the energy of life itself.